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"The Public-School System a Failure."

A REPLY

TO

RICHARD GRANT WHITE.

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A Paper

READ BEFORE THE MASSACHUSETTS TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION, DECEMBER, 1880,

BY

B. F. TWEED.

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"THE PUBLIC-SCHOOL SYSTEM A FAILURE."

Mr. Richard Grant White says, in the December number of "The North American Review," that, "as an imparter of useful knowledge, the public-school system has failed utterly." And, again, "The case is worse than mere failure; for the result has been deplorable, and threatens to be disastrous." Indeed, according to some statements in this remarkable article, it has already proved disastrous to the intelligence and morals of the people where public schools have existed.

This has rather a strange sound to Northern ears. But, like many other discoveries that seem new, those familiar with Shakspeare's Henry VI. will recognize it as what the ethnographers call a "survival."

So far as I know, it was Jack Cade who made the original discovery that Lord Say had "most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm, in erecting a grammar school." Whether Mr. White got the hint from Cade, I don't know; but there seems to be a marvellous resemblance in their ideas.

Before following Mr. White through some of the details of his article, it will be well, perhaps, to call attention to his two leading propositions, on which the whole article rests.

His first proposition is, that, "as an imparter of useful knowledge, the public-school system has failed utterly."

This proposition he proves to his own satisfaction, by the aid of some detached statements in Mr. Walton's report of examinations in Norfolk County, as well as by some exceptional lithographed examples of poor work contained in that report; and by some exaggerated statements of Mr. Charles Francis Adams, jun., which are sufficiently answered by an official document of the date referred to, bearing his own signature.

Having established, as he thinks, his first proposition, Mr. White lays down another, of which it cannot be said that it is like unto the first. It is this: that "Ignorance is not the mother of vice," and has no connection with it, except that they sometimes co-exist, neither of them being the cause of the other.

And how do you suppose he undertakes to prove this? Why, by assuming that his first proposition is *false*, and that the States in which a public-school system exists are more intelligent, have more knowledge, than those that have no public-school system; for he goes on to present such an array of statistics, manipulated to suit his purpose, as shows to his satisfaction, that those communities which have been long under the influence of a public-school system have more crime and immorality than those which have been without it.

But, supposing it to be true (which of course I do not admit) that crime and immorality have been more common in the States where public schools exist, than in others: how does this prove that "ignorance is not the mother of vice"?

He has already assured us, that "as an imparter of useful knowledge, the public-school system has failed utterly." Why, then, should we not *presume* the communities that have not been cursed with a common-school system, but where, in the language of Mr. White, education has been remitted to parents, — "the natural guardians and earthly providence of their children," — I say, why should we not presume such communities

to possess more useful knowledge than those that have had a school system only to find that "as an imparter of useful knowledge it failed utterly"?

What, then, has Mr. White proved? If the first proposition, then his statistics — if they do not prove that "ignorance *is* the mother of vice" — do prove that the amount of crime in a community is in direct proportion to the amount of ignorance.

If, therefore, his first proposition is true, he has disproved the second. If his second is proved, it is by a direct denial of the first; for it rests entirely on the assumption that those communities where a school system has existed are more intelligent, that is, have more knowledge.

It reminds one of the gentleman's servant, who cut off a favorite dog's head to save the pitcher into which he had thrust it, and then broke the pitcher to get the dog's head out.

Such being the character of this article as shown in its two leading propositions, it may be proper to remind Mr. White, that logicians have found the same difficulty in proving contradictories, that railroad men have in trying to make two trains pass each other on the same track. Thus far the result has always been a damaging collision.

But let us inquire a little into the nature of Mr. White's proof.

Mr. White quotes from a recent statement of Charles Francis Adams, jun., that when, in 1873, they examined the schools of Quincy, "the result was deplorable. They all fell through," &c.

But let us see how this statement — made in 1880 — agrees with the annual reports, made when the facts were fresh in the mind of Mr. Adams.

From the school report of Quincy for 1872–73, I take the following: —

"The standard of education has not been notably advanced

during some years, so far as the committee can judge. But while this is substantially true, it is also true, that the standard has neither been lowered nor drawn back; *and it is possible that an eagerness for exceptional excellence may have blinded us to a steady and substantial, though slow advance.* To those who can recall the situation twenty years since, this may appear considerable."

Again, "It has been said that a point has been reached in our schools which seems to be near the goal at which common schools aim; and this is substantially true, taking into consideration the age and average attendance of the pupils."

In the report of 1873–74 I find the following: —

"The School Committee, in entering upon the performance of the closing duty of their school year, are glad to be able to congratulate the people of Quincy upon the satisfactory general character of the results they have to report.

"While there have been no striking alterations in the main system of management, no radical innovation in method of instruction, nor considerable change in the style of teachers, a *fair, even, and well-distributed improvement* has been noted in most of the departments of study."

Then, after speaking of several schools, one of which "appeared much better," another "not so well," and others bearing "indications of improvement," the report continues; "But, as a rule, the committee saw nothing which leads them to modify the opinion expressed in their last annual report, to the effect that, as regards instruction, a point has been reached which is near the natural term of such force as our present system of schooling is calculated to exert.

"At the same time it is to be remembered, that, as compared with many years ago, *the tests applied to our schools have much increased in severity.*

"The new principle of conducting the examinations introduced

by the committee a year ago, under which a single and the same branch of the studies pursued is in the examinations of all the schools assigned to each member of the committee, has also been pursued this year. During the examinations, the schools are thus taken wholly out of the hands of their instructors and into those of the committee.

"Under these circumstances a mere education of 'veneering' is sure to reveal its false character. It is wholly impossible to prepare classes for a 'show-off.' The examinations, therefore, now at least reveal as a whole the real results of our schooling. . . . They do not show all that we might desire they should; but *they do show much*, and what they do show is there: there is at least no parade of results which have no reality in existence."

So said the two excellent reports of the Quincy schools, 1872–73 and 1873–74; both of which were adopted and issued by a committee, of which Mr. Charles Francis Adams, jun., and his brother John Quincy Adams, were members.

But perhaps this inconsistency in Mr. Adams's utterances is susceptible of an explanation creditable to the present condition of the schools, and indicative that he now takes a broader view of what our philosophical friends would call the "potentialities" of our schools.

In 1873 Mr. Adams knew less of our common schools than he does now, after a long term of service on the school committee. When, therefore, in the light of the great improvement he has seen during the last five or six years, he looks back to the examination of 1873, it is no wonder he exclaims, "It was deplorable." He looks from a different standpoint. It is the old story of the two-sided shield. Mr. Adams had seen only the silver side then; and, like our financiers, previous to that period, he was content with the "dollar of our fathers." Now, having seen the golden side, that "pale and common

drudge 'tween man and man" is not satisfactory. He is understood to favor the gold standard, as well in education as in finance.

I may say, also, that Mr. Walton's report, on which Mr. White relies so much for proof of his first proposition, *as a whole*, does not justify his indiscriminate condemnation of the schools, even in Norfolk County.

Any one who knows Mr. Walton knows, that, while he would be the last man to do injustice to teachers and pupils, he is by nature and habit sufficiently critical to guard against any undue leniency of judgment. And the summing-up of the percentages obtained is considerably above what is required in our best colleges for graduation.

So, also, the lithographs of letters and narratives by primary and grammar school pupils are, I do not hesitate to say, as a whole, creditable. Some are very good; many are creditable; some, I admit, are very poor; and I might have doubted the expediency or justice of circulating them without some explanation.

What is the natural capacity of the pupil whose work is here exhibited?

How long has he been in school?

Has he been regular in attendance?

If it had appeared that the poorest work was done by pupils of average capacity, who had been regular in their attendance during the usual school course, and the best work by those whose limited attendance and other circumstances had saved them from the demoralizing effects of the school system, I should have admitted that there was some force in Mr. White's strictures.

I should like to have some theological Mr. Walton go through a county, — I care not if it be Norfolk, that the parallel may be complete, — and test the knowledge and practice

of the several congregations of that county in the rudiments of Christianity, marking their progress in the Christian virtues on the same scale of percentages as used in the schools.

Then, if it were possible, — I don't know exactly how it could be done, — I would have fac-similes of their knowledge of Christian principles, as it appears in their acts, — what they do; that we might see whether "their lips and lives express the holy gospel they profess."

If this report should be found better than the educational report, I should say, so much the more creditable to the clergymen, and so much the less creditable to the school-teachers.

If, however, it should prove otherwise, I should not immediately jump to the conclusion that Christianity is a failure. It may not have done its perfect work. Indeed, we know it has not. It has encountered innumerable obstacles. Like our school system, that perfect system of Christian morality has depended for its promulgation on fallible men, many of whom have had no more appreciation of the principles of Christianity than the average school-teacher has of the principles of pedagogy.

And yet, with all these drawbacks, it may have been, and I believe it has been, the most important factor in the world's progress. No doubt the apostle was justified in speaking of the "foolishness of preaching;" and I will not take issue with any one who speaks of the foolishness of a great deal of the teaching in our schools. Still, poor preaching and poor teaching have been infinitely better than none.

But, on the main question, whether public schools have proved a "lamentable failure," I take it, we have more convincing proof than any county report or any tabulated statistics of percentages can disprove, that, with all their defects, they have not been a failure, but have drawn a distinct and ineffaceable line between those States where public schools have existed, and

those where they have not, — by the superior intelligence and even material prosperity of the former. I say ineffaceable line; for Mr. White himself fully recognizes it in trying to prove his second proposition, though he had put his India-rubber conscience to its severest test in trying to erase it. One has but to read the doings of Congress, and the daily papers, to learn that what Mr. White says should have been seen if the school system were not a failure, actually exists. What *was* the Southern Confederacy is now applauding and striving to imitate what Mr. White pronounces an utter failure. The leading Southern papers are alive to the importance of a public-school system, and Southern statesmen are favoring national aid, notwithstanding their sensitiveness on the subject of State rights.

As to the moral influence of our school system, and the ratio of crime in the two divisions, about which Mr. White has so much to say, it is sufficient answer to refer him to the able and exhaustive report of Mr. Carroll D. Wright, Chief of Bureau of Statistics of Labor. Had Mr. White carefully studied this report, he might have saved himself the trouble of writing a considerable part of his article, and thus refuting what remained of it.

I have only to make a few brief extracts from this report, to show how utterly fallacious all reasoning on the census statistics must be, unaccompanied by such explanation as is contained in Mr. Wright's report.

Gen. Walker, superintendent of census returns in 1870, says, —

"No single measure can be taken for determining the proportion of crime in the several communities of our country.

"The absence of any effort to reduce to a consistent body the returns on this subject in the last census" — that to which Mr. White refers — "led to misrepresentations of States and sections. In some cases returns were restricted to convictions

for grave offences, while in others convictions for the most petty offences were equally considered."

Then follows this statement, which seems to have escaped Mr. White's notice: "In the opinion of the superintendent, no use of these figures for purposes of comparisons between the States will be justifiable without reference to the foregoing."

And yet this is exactly what Mr. White has done. Is it possible that *he* is one of the victims of our public-school system? Was it in a public school that he learned to use the census returns in a manner which the superintendent of those returns says is "unjustifiable"?

But there are other reasons for pronouncing Mr. White's use of these returns "unjustifiable."

Mr. Carroll D. Wright, in comparing Massachusetts and Virginia, as representative States, shows that, while the criminal code of Massachusetts, in 1860, provided for one hundred and fifty-eight offences designated as crimes, the code of Virginia recognized but one hundred and eight such offences punishable at law; and several of these, common to both States, were punishable by imprisonment in Massachusetts, but only by fine in Virginia.

Of the commitments in Massachusetts in 1860, more than half (fifty-four per cent) were for offences punishable in Virginia by fine only.

Perhaps it may throw a little light on the value of Mr. White's statistics to show the demoralizing effects of our schools, to state that the moral sense of different communities, as expressed in their laws, differs widely. Thus, while in Massachusetts adultery, fornication, and many other offences, are regarded as grave, and punishable by imprisonment, in Virginia they may be condoned by a fine.

I ought, perhaps, in justice to Mr. White, to say that he does admit that *murder* has been more common in the non-school-

system States; but he insists that they have been more respectable murders, so far as motives are concerned, than those where the school-system has existed. I don't know in what respects; though Judge Tourgee's books suggest that they may have been mere political murders, which, being necessary to good State government, may be supposed to have been committed by some of the best citizens of that fortunate section which has escaped the disastrous influence of public schools.

Of the comparative merits of the "tooling" (as De Quincey calls it when treating of murder as one of the fine arts), Mr. White has unfortunately not expressed an opinion; so that a choice of tools, whether the revolver, the shot-gun, the bludgeon, or what not, must still be left to the fancy of the individual artist.

But, leaving Mr. White, our school critics *generally*, I think, are in the habit of making exaggerated statements; and these statements, being made at different times and under different circumstances, are not always consistent with each other.

Thus: I have heard a distinguished New-England orator speak in very disparaging terms of our free schools, treading close upon the heels of Mr. R. G. White. That was when he wished to prove one thing. In less than six months from that time, I heard the same orator say, "It was the free schools of the North that saved the Union." Then he was trying to prove something else. Now, there is nothing helps a man so much in an argument as a facility in making his own facts. I heard another, when speaking of the millions spent for school-houses and teachers, and the unsatisfactory character of the results, say, "It don't pay." I don't believe, however, that the gentleman really thought that the State of Massachusetts would have been richer, even in material wealth, if free schools had never existed in the State.

But, notwithstanding the exaggerations and inconsistencies of

many of these complaints, they cannot be allowed to pass unheeded. They are evidences of a pervading feeling of dissatisfaction with present methods and results, in which *I* certainly share; for among teachers, as in other so-called professions, we often find the spirit of conservatism so strong, that any suggestions of better methods are looked upon as direct attacks upon our schools, and resisted at once, as wild and harmful innovations.

I presume I could present a more spicy paper, if I took either of these two extremes. But, fortunately or otherwise, I am not by nature an extremist. I have, for a long time, felt that I was born to occupy a *mean* position. This may seem, at first sight, to indicate a degree of modesty which I do not claim, and which my friends know I do not possess. I don't *mean mean*, in any *mean* sense, but a mean whose product is equal, certainly, to the product of the *extremes*. There are perhaps some advantages in this position. It gives me a chance to shoot both ways; and it stiffens my courage, because I can't retreat without running into an enemy's lines. So, when I hear a radical belabor the past and present, and declare that every thing is wrong, and must be righted by adopting some new and untried hypothesis, which is warranted as a panacea for all the ills our schools are heir to, I always find myself taking the part of a conservative; and I seldom have any difficulty in finding *something good* in whatever has commended itself to the best and most intelligent men for a long series of years.

On the other hand, when I hear teachers speak as though our schools were perfect, and see them resist all attempts at improvement, I have no difficulty in finding arguments for essential changes. As Watts says, —

> "I've seen enough of what is called
> Perfection here below."

But because our schools have not made all our citizens intelligent, and banished ignorance from the State, I am not prepared to pronounce them an utter failure, any more than I am to pronounce Christianity an utter failure because in nineteen centuries it has failed to bring the millennium.

But taking into account the tools we have to work with; recalling to mind, that, of the seven or eight thousand teachers employed in the State, only a small fraction have ever received any special preparation, or have had any considerable experience, — I am astonished that the results are as good as they are.

I am not surprised, however, that our schools are severely criticised when I see the absurd teaching in many of them whose teachers have not the excuse of a limited experience, and insufficient means of preparation.

In language, for instance, when I see the teachers stultifying their pupils with distinctions where there are no grammatical differences, telling them of the agreement of words in properties of which one of them is destitute, and then trying to palm it off on pupils as knowledge that will enable them to speak and write correctly, I am almost ready to join the critics whom I criticise. If I do not, I am glad to have others blow such a blast as may awaken the dead, (I mean the pedagogically dead,) putting life into the dry bones, and changing our schools from *cemeteries* to *seminaries* of learning.

That there are teachers sleeping their last sleep so soundly that nothing but the trump of doom can arouse them, you and I know; and these are not always young and inexperienced teachers, but old routine teachers, from whom, in the consciousness of having "sounded all the depths and shoals" of their profession, the lessons of experience and counsel glide off like water from a duck's back.

For reasons, therefore, already indicated, I am thankful when an *angel* troubles the pedagogical waters, feeling assured it will

impart a healing power; and I hope that the lame and impotent, who *keep* school instead of *teaching*, may find some one in the shape of a superintendent or otherwise to plunge them in. I say, when an *angel* troubles the waters; for we have two classes of critics, — those who punish us "for our good," as good teachers always punish their pupils, and those who apply the lash merely to see the victim cringe, as good teachers never do, and should therefore be exempt from themselves.

It is in this view that I look upon the strictures of those critics of whom Mr. Adams is a type, as "the wounds of a friend." Most of their criticisms are aimed at evils actually existing in too many of our schools; and even their exaggerations may be necessary to arouse those of us who are deaf to every thing but a thunder-clap.

For the other class, of whom Mr. R. G. White is a very pronounced type, and whose criticisms are dictated by pure —— (the next word is so blurred that I fail to make it out: you may supply any word you please), — for this class, I care little. It is enough to draw their fangs by showing their inconsistencies.

But this is not the place, and I am not the man, to give the final answer to our school critics. Nor do I wish their number less. I only desire that their criticisms should be more intelligent and discriminating. If they did but know it, there are enough vulnerable points where their darts, rightly aimed, would "draw blood" every time.

We can only hope that the Board of Education, the normal schools, judicious supervision, and, above all, interested, faithful, and well-prepared teachers in all the schools of the State, may frame a defensive armor that shall render our school system invulnerable.

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